Computer Mapping and Data Protection

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Chapter II Outline

II.   Making the Data and Maps Available

A. Here are some of the advantages of making crime-related data and maps available to the general public, other agencies, and researchers:

1. The workload of the police department may actually be reduced by providing crime maps via the Internet or other convenient mechanism; that is, fewer calls will be made into the crime analysis section for special requests if the maps are readily available.

2. As previously indicated, citizens have an inherent right to know about crime in their neighborhoods.

3. Maps can assist in community policing and problem solving by showing where problems do and do not exist.

4. Maps can increase public awareness about problems in the neighborhood.

5. Partnerships with researchers and other agencies can be facilitated with maps for the benefit of all concerned.

6. If the police department does not provide maps and data, someone (media, neighborhood group, etc.) eventually will – and then the department runs

the risk of their data being interpreted and then displayed by an outsider (who may not be overly knowledgeable about crime data).

B. There are, however, several potential disadvantages to providing crime maps:

1. The information may be used for commercial purposes, such as alarm companies calling burglary victims, etc.

2. Potential offenders may use crime maps for the benefit of identifying areas that have not been targeted and may therefore not be receiving the attention of the police department.

3. There is a perceived concern that crime maps can adversely affect a high-crime area by, for example, reducing the value of property in the area. No definitive study of this concern has been made.

4. Crime maps are open to misinterpretation by the viewer.

C. What are some of the privacy issues in regard to maps of crime and other crime-related data?

1. A victim may be traumatized beyond that associated with the crime because the map shows the exact location of the offense, such as the victim's residence.

2. Victims may fear harassment or retaliation, thereby deterring them from testifying or cooperating with an investigation.

3. If a person is victimized again, he/she may decide not to report the offense because of concerns about publicity via a crime map.

4. Information associated with a map, such as a listing of incident-specific information, may be accessible, opening the potential for misuse.

D. Who has taken the leap and provided maps for public consumption?

1. The leaders include Sacramento PD, Illinois State PD, San Diego PD/ARJIS, Cambridge PD, Oklahoma City (TV station), and Washington, DC (neighborhood group).

    2. However, there have been some lessons learned along the way, such as the initial experiences in Sacramento of providing too much information on its web site.

E. What are some of the key issues that a police department may want to address before providing maps to the public, other agencies, and researchers?

    1. Should data be provided on a point-by-point basis or aggregated to a larger geographic area, such as a neighborhood? There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, along with alternatives such as showing mid-block locations.

    2. What types of data should be mapped (e.g., crimes, calls for service, arrests, citizen complaints, etc.)?

    3. Should data on juvenile arrests and victims be mapped?

    4. What other data should be shown on the maps, such as schools, parks, hospitals, public housing, bars, banks, convenience stores, etc.?

    5. How often should maps be updated and who within the department has responsibility for updates?

    6. What problems will viewers have in understanding the proposed maps and data and how can interpretation be made easier?

    7. Because geocoding hit rates are seldom 100 percent, how can information about geocoding be conveyed to viewers?

    8. There are several cartographic issues for which decisions need to be made:

        a. Symbols for the maps (size, shape, color, graduated symbols)

        b. Scale

        c. Legend

F. A local department may want to establish general guidelines for addressing the above-mentioned questions and issues.

    1. Discuss the general benefits of guidelines.

2. Provide specific guidelines on use of point/aggregate data, types of data to be mapped (and not mapped), when updates will be made, description of geocoding hit rates, how to interpret maps.

G. Based on the research to date and experience of police departments, here are some specific guidelines for consideration:

1. Use disclaimers

   a. Describe the benefits of disclaimers.

   b. Give some specific examples (e.g., Sacramento, http://206.170.172.28/GISAPPS/cdisclaimer.htm).

   c. Note that there are still liability risks even with the use of a disclaimer.

2. Provide information on geocoding rates.

   a. Discuss why this is important.

   b. Give examples on wording on geocoding rates.

3. Provide guidelines on how to interpret maps.

   a. Discuss the source of the data in the map (e.g., reported crimes to the police, arrestees who have been identified as gang members, etc.).

   b. Discuss what the maps contain. For example, define what a Part I crime is.

   c. Describe the symbols used, scale, colors, etc.

   d. Discuss what to look for in a map and what's not there.

4. Encourage correct uses of maps:

   a. Educate the public.

   b. Involve citizens in problem solving.

   c. Respect the rights of victims.

   d. Avoid overreaction to crimes.